A short history of the Holy Club

Members of the so called ‘Holy Club’ established a way of life in Oxford that profoundly influenced the development of the Methodist movement and which continues to shape the Methodist Church today.

The Holy Club was one of the many nicknames used for the group of young men, including the Wesley brothers, who met together in Oxford, between 1729 and 1735. Other similarly derisive names included, the Bible Moths, Supererogation men and eventually Methodists. Never an intentional or official society, it was this group which John Wesley would later describe as the ‘first rise of Methodism’.

Beginnings

It began with the young undergraduates, Charles Wesley and William Morgan. Responding to University pressure to take their faith and work more seriously, they began to support each other in both their studies and religious practice. John had encouraged this by letter whilst at home in Epworth and, returning to Oxford in the summer of 1729, effectively took charge of what was a small but growing group.

Encouraged by John’s presence, they met to study and pray together, they attended the Sacrament regularly and began to keep spiritual diaries. Late in the winter of the same year, they were joined by Bob Kirkham, a friend of John’s from his undergraduate years.

Social Action

In the summer of 1730, William Morgan persuaded his friends to accompany him in visiting prisoners, then in helping the poor and providing education for local children. It was around this time, and partly as a result of these new activities, that the group of young men became dubbed ‘The Holy Club’.

Growth

In June 1732, weakened by illness, William Morgan returned home to Ireland. Around the same time John Clayton, who already ran a small religious society of his own at Brasenose, became associated with the group.

Clayton's influence led to the development of subsidiary groups, the practice of regular spiritual practices like fasting and also importantly introduced John to the work of the SPCK (Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge).

An increase in numbers led to the need for additional structure, which made good use of John Wesley's organisational skills. It was around this time that the phrase 'Methodist' to describe the group, was first used, although this was not intended as a compliment.

Hostility

By the autumn of 1732, news had reached Oxford of the death of William Morgan. Rumours spread that it was the rigours of the Methodist lifestyle that had killed him.

Wesley launched a vigorous defence, first by writing a letter to Morgan's father and then by preaching a sermon in the University Church (Jan 1st 1733). Both set out the fundamental Christian principles by which the group were trying to live.

The reactions to the sermon were mixed and further pressure on the group emerged when John's letter to Morgan senior was leaked and published within a derogatory pamphlet called *The Oxford Methodists*.

Developments

Despite these setbacks, the number of students meeting in small groups rose. Benjamin Ingham and George Whitefield joined the 'Holy Club' and began to influence its development.

Levels of dedication though, varied. Some students were not interested in all the 'holy living' practices while others tended towards an excessive level of introspection. Work was extended to assist those in the

Gloucester Green Workhouse and to relieve the poor at St Bartholomew's Hospital while others moved away.

By the end of the 1734, although more than 40 people had been associated with Oxford Methodism thus far, John was struggling to discern where his future lay. His father, who was in poor health, strongly encouraged him to take over the living at Epworth.

New direction

Although appearing to waver as his Father faded, John did not take over the living following Samuel's death in April 1735. He returned to Oxford to continue his academic career.

Very shortly afterwards however, the opportunity arose for both Wesley brothers to go to the new colony of Georgia, sponsored by the SPCK. John leapt at the chance, persuaded Charles to join him and in the end Benjamin Ingham also sailed with them.

With these departures, although Methodism persisted in Oxford both within the University and the City, the period John later referred to as the 'first rise of Methodism', effectively came to an end.

Influence on later Methodism

The desire to live a Christ-like life, the value of small groups and good organisation, the rhythm of public worship and private prayer, the call to serve to the most needy and the power of the spoken and printed word to change hearts and minds, are all still very characteristic of **The Methodist Way of Life.**